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Nature Therapy

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HEALTHY CHOICES

Our disconnection from nature has serious implications for our health and child development.

Nature Therapy

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Protect your children from nature-deficit disorder.



There is a wonderful healing power in nature. Gardens and natural landscapes have long been recognized as therapeutic and restorative to our health. In this virtual age, we need to better connect with nature. In his national bestseller, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv says children need nature for their development, healthy learning, creativity and psychological well-being.

More than 100 studies confirm that spending time in nature is beneficial for reducing one's stress, both physical and emotional. While large sums of money are spent on antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications and sedatives, we observe that nature is a healing balm for depression and mental disorders. Children have less behavioral disorders, anxiety and depression, and more self-worth when they have a more natural landscape near their homes than children living in homes with less green landscape.

People typically feel invigorated from viewing a beautiful sunset, a cascading waterfall, colorful birds at a backyard birdfeeder, playful animal pets, a magnificent snow-capped mountain, a grand and colorful canyon, a meadow full of spring flowers, or a beautiful fall landscape. These things can lift the human spirit from anxiety and depression.

Subjects experience significant decreases in blood pressure by watching fish in a large fish pond or aquarium. Dental and medical offices are able to relax their patients better by placing fish tanks full of colorful fish in their waiting rooms. Exposure to plants or nature can speed up the recovery time from injury. Gallbladder surgery patients with a view of trees from their recovery rooms went home sooner than patients with a view of a brick wall.

The obesity epidemic seen in American children is connected with their sedentary lifestyle and extended time spent with electronic media rather than playtime in natural



settings. Children tend to be more physically active when they're outside. Maybe it's time to unplug our kids from the Internet and let them enjoy play in nature. Researchers found that joggers who exercised in a natural setting with landscape views felt less anxious, angry and depressed than persons who burned the same amount of calories in gyms.

Some universities now offer degrees in horticultural therapy. Therapists design gardens that assist people with physical, emotional or mental disabilities to develop adaptations and coping methods that enhance their lives. These programs recognize the therapeutic benefits of gardening for people with chronic illnesses. People who learn the names of plants are more likely to value them. Giving a name to something is a way of making the plant a part of your community. As a result, we see a more responsible stewardship of nature.

Finally, therapy dogs are valuable for reassuring victims of natural disasters, such as Superstorm Sandy. They also help children grapple with grief in school shootings such as in Newtown, Connecticut, and to brighten the days of nursing home patients. Simply petting a dog can decrease levels of stress hormones, lower blood pressure and provide emotional release. Therapy dogs have excellent listening skills and demonstrate unconditional love.

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